



Maytree Policy in Focus

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Change eligibility criteria to ensure that those who need it, get language training

Featured Research SUMMARY

Renewing Toronto's ESL Programs... charting a course towards more effective ESL program delivery

by Sheri Regier, Tam Goossen, Miriam Digiuseppe and John Campey (2005)

Renew and Expand Language Programs to Support Immigrant Children

- For newcomers to Canada learning English or French is crucial to their successful integration. Providing accessible and high-quality language programs is crucial for academic achievement.
- Yet, eligibility for second-language programming in our schools is unrelated to language proficiency, and language training is underfunded.
- School-age second-language learners, particularly those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, have lower test scores and higher drop-out rates than their English- or French-speaking counterparts.
- The report highlighted in this issue presents a number of recommendations that will strengthen second-language learning for immigrant children in Canada.
- According to the 2006 Census, one in five Canadians is foreign-born. Approximately, 60% of the foreign-born live in the regions of Toronto (60%), Montreal (20%) and Vancouver (21%). More than 70% of the foreign-born population speak a mother tongue other than English or French.

This report highlights how arbitrary eligibility and a lack of dedicated resources for English as a Second Language (ESL) in the Greater Toronto Area lead to poor academic outcomes for school-aged second-language learners. It recommends:

- ensuring that school boards dedicate ESL funds allocated by the province to ESL programs – currently, ESL funds are diverted to other essential services;
- assessing all students entering the school system (regardless of place of birth, or time of arrival in Canada) and removing arbitrary restrictions on access to ESL services;
- exempting ESL students from standardized tests until appropriate alternatives are developed because they often do poorly as a result of inadequate language skills;
- providing better guidance to ESL students and their families to help them become familiar with the Canadian education system (for example, the consequences of streaming);
- being more proactive at the school board level to hire teachers support and administrative staff who reflect the diversity of the student population; and,
- ensuring that all teachers have some training in ESL teaching to prepare them for their diverse classrooms.

Background and Context

According to the 2006 Census, one in five Canadians is foreign-born. Approximately, 60% of the foreign born live in the regions of Toronto (60%), Montreal (20%) and Vancouver (21%). More than 70% have a mother tongue other than English or French.¹

For immigrants to Canada, learning English or French is one of the key determinants of successful settlement, academic and labour market success. It is imperative to Canada's future that immigrants do well, because by as early as 2011 immigration will account for all of Canada's net labour force growth, and by 2030 immigration may become the only source of net population growth.²

Yet despite the importance and increasing demand for second-language programs in Canada, second-language services have not kept pace with the needs of newcomers.

Who delivers second-language Education?

The federal government funds English or French as a second-language for adults through the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program. The provinces fund elementary and secondary school second-language programs and fund some language and settlement services for adults. Many of the programs and services funded by government are delivered by community organizations.

Newcomers to Canada can also choose to learn English or French at a private institution.

Second-language programs differ dramatically between provinces in terms of funding, teacher qualifications and eligibility restrictions, and curricula.

How well do elementary and secondary schools prepare second-language learners?

The children of immigrants and young immigrant children do quite well in Canadian schools. Children who don't speak English or French, entering the school system at the same time as their peers, usually catch up by age 13.³

But recent research points to some disturbing trends for older children and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

¹ Government of Canada, "Immigration in Canada: A Portrait of the Foreign Born Population, Census 2006," (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, December 2007), 5.

² Statistics Canada, "The Canadian Immigrant Labour Market in 2006: First Results from Canada's Labour Force Survey." The Daily, Monday, September 10, 2007.

³ Christopher Worswick, "School Performance of the Children of Immigrants in Canada, 1994-1998," (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 14 November 2001), 13-14.

⁴ Kelleen Toohey and Tracey M. Derving, "Hidden Losses: How Demographics Can Encourage Incorrect Assumptions about ESL High School Students' Success,"

(Metropolis Working Paper Series, No. 06-11, July 2006), 13-14.

⁵ Sheri Regier, Tam Goossen, Miriam DiGiuseppe and John Campey, *Renewing Toronto's ESL Programs...charting a course towards more effective ESL program delivery.* (Toronto: The Community Social Planning Council of Toronto, 2005), 6.

A recent report, using Vancouver School Board data, found that English as a Second Language (ESL) students from more educated and prosperous families fare far better than those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, often refugees.⁴

In Toronto, where one in three students is born outside the country,⁵ academic success also varies. The proportion of persons aged 25-34 who have not completed high school is more than 30% for a number of groups, many of whom came to Canada in their early teens, and did not have English as their first language.⁶ As is the case in Vancouver, those from families with lower incomes and from "refugee producing" countries have higher high school drop-out rates.⁷

"Like the proverbial elephant in the middle of the living room, ESL is a looming, mishandled entity that nobody wants to deal with, but that is taking over the room."⁸

On the other hand, in Greater Montreal, the province's particular emphasis on integration through French-language acquisition has produced a comprehensive French as a Second-Language (FSL) system in schools. Small, full-time FSL classes aimed at preparing students for integration into regular classes are coupled with linguistic support programs that track students during their first two years in Canadian schools. Second-language programming has been described as "more extensive in Quebec than in any other Canadian province."⁹

How well does language training prepare adults?

Although this *Maytree Policy in Focus* is on language training for school-aged children, ESL and FSL are very important to the integration and labour market success of adult immigrants. The federal government has recognized this fact and is putting substantial emphasis and funding into this area.

Unfortunately many adult newcomers are not eligible for language training under the federally-funded Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program. This includes refugee claimants, temporary workers and foreign students – some of whom will become permanent residents. Citizens are also not eligible for LINC, despite the fact that while it only takes three years to become eligible for citizenship, language acquisition can take much longer.

⁶ Michael Ornstein, *Ethno-Racial Groups in Toronto, 1971-2001: A Demographic and Socio-Economic Profile* (Toronto: York University Institute for Social Research, January 2006), 45.

⁷ Michael Ornstein , *Ethno-Racial Groups in Toronto, 1971-2001*, v.

⁸ Mary Myers, *Myths and Delusions: The State of ESL in Large Canadian School Boards*, (Toronto: Mainstream Publications, May 2003), 1.

⁹ Marie McAndrew, "Immigration and Diversity: Some Policy Issues Confronting the Quebec School System," *Policy Options* (Montreal: IRPP, October 2003), 60-63.

RENEWING TORONTO'S ESL PROGRAMS...CHARTING A COURSE TOWARDS MORE EFFECTIVE ESL PROGRAM DELIVERY

2005 BY SHERI REGIER, TAM GOOSSEN, MIRIAM DIGIUSEPPE AND JOHN CAMPEY

The Community Social Planning Council of Toronto, available at:
www.socialplanningtoronto.org

This report highlights a number of problems with the way ESL is delivered in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), and concludes with a range of recommendations for governments, school boards and service providers.

Arbitrary Eligibility and Inconsistent Assessment

The authors note that as a result of provincial policies, children's access to English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in the GTA is determined by number of years in Canada, rather than by language proficiency. To be eligible, children must have been in Canada for four years or less and arrived from non-English speaking countries. This excludes students who were born in Canada but do not speak English. If eligible, students are assessed by immigrant reception centres, or in some cases by local schools. Assessment standards vary from province to province. The authors fear that the lack of standardization across the country duplicates efforts and makes it difficult to measure the progress of students nationally.

Lack of Dedicated Resources

More than one in three students in Toronto public schools is born outside of Canada. Yet chronic funding shortages to ESL continue, and schools are not formally mandated by the province to spend ESL funds on ESL programs. Cash-strapped boards have diverted ESL funding toward other program expenses.

Regular classroom teachers do not require any formal ESL training, even though they may have many students in their classes who are also taking ESL. These regular classroom teachers may also be teaching ESL part-time, even though, unlike ESL-specific teachers, they are not trained in second-language instruction.

Schools may be ill-equipped to help ESL students who also need basic literacy. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at the elementary school level, the focus on literacy often overwhelms the general linguistic components of ESL programs. In high school, the special needs of ESL literacy students are not always clearly differentiated from those of regular ESL students.

Impact on Canada's Newest Citizens

The cumulative result is that ESL programming is insufficient, and students are often streamed into lower, non-academic programs, potentially limiting their post-secondary or career opportunities. The complexity of the education system and an absence of English-language skills make it particularly difficult for ESL students and their families to understand how streaming can affect future academic options. School-aged ESL students are required to take the same provincially-mandated standardized academic tests as English speakers; and they consequently do far worse. The report also points to a lack of linguistically and ethnically representative school staff, which the authors feel could help to familiarize students and their families with the Canadian education system.

To address the challenges, the report recommends:

- developing a comprehensive provincial ESL policy, with provisions to ensure that school boards dedicate ESL funds to ESL programs;
- assessing all students entering the school system (regardless of place of birth, or time of arrival in Canada) and removing arbitrary restrictions on access to ESL services;
- exempting ESL students from standardized tests until appropriate alternatives are developed;
- maintaining a distinction between language learning and literacy programs;
- providing better guidance to ESL students and their families with regard to secondary school decisions by engaging parents, strengthening family support services and hiring community advisors and youth workers;
- being more proactive at the school board level to hire teachers, support and administrative staff who reflect the diversity of the student population; and,
- ensuring that all teachers have some training in ESL to prepare them for their diverse classrooms.

Conclusions and Additional Information

Given the importance of language acquisition to academic achievement, and the high number of immigrants Canada receives each year, language learning is an essential investment in our collective future. This investment is currently under-resourced and administered with eligibility criteria unrelated to language proficiency. Many young immigrants are falling through the cracks in our education system and are not being given the support they need to reach their potential. This problem is most acutely felt in Toronto, which has one of the highest foreign-born populations of any city in the world.

The report highlighted in this issue of *Maytree Policy in Focus* provides a number of recommendations for strengthening second-language learning for immigrant children.

To consider:

The Ontario Ministry of Education released a new ESL policy in late 2007. The policy calls for ESL supports to students until they are academically capable in English, suggests that an acceptable standard be met before supports are removed, and differentiates between levels of ESL need.

But, the guidelines were not made mandatory for Ontario schools. Moreover, schools were not formally mandated to spend ESL funding on ESL programs.¹⁰

¹⁰ People for Education, "Ontario's urban and suburban schools," (Toronto: People for Education, 2008), 18.

Selected Annotated Bibliography

Toohey, Kelleen and Tracey M. Derwing. *Hidden Losses: How Demographics Can Encourage Incorrect Assumptions about ESL High School Students' Success*. Metropolis Working Paper Series, July 2006.

This report examines ESL in BC secondary schools. Comparing the BC Ministry of Education's ESL student graduation rates with those of the Vancouver School Board, the authors find that students from poorer, refugee or family class status families fare worse than other immigrant children. The authors recommend developing more coordinated and collaborative approaches to funding and teaching. They also recommend improved ESL teacher training, particularly with respect to literacy programs.

The Learning Partnership. *The Quality of Public Education in Canada*. Issue 3, fall 2007. www.thelearningpartnership.ca.

The report explains how, at a time when population aging is promising profound economic and social challenges, growing populations of immigrants, Aboriginals and rural-to-urban migrants continue to face significant barriers to success. Schools have an enormous role to play as the major institutional setting where young Canadians develop the skills and shared values to become productive and engaged citizens. It describes how Canadians must be willing to help disadvantaged groups get ahead, governments must increasingly work in concert on the development of policy and delivery of services, school systems must improve data collection to support informed decision-making, and educators must understand and include ethno-cultural issues in teaching and learning.

Ontario's Urban and Suburban Schools. People for Education, 2008. www.peopleforeducation.com.

Among the findings in this report: 1) 63% of Ontario's students attend urban/suburban schools. 2) Urban and suburban boards receive on average, \$920 less per pupil than their non-urban counterparts. 3) 29% of urban/suburban elementary schools had ESL students but no ESL teachers. This discussion paper is the first step in a larger effort to better understand how schools can be sites of community engagement.



About Maytree Policy in Focus

Maytree Policy in Focus, a publication of Maytree, identifies and shares practical research to help inform policy- and decision-making.

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About Maytree

Maytree is a private Canadian charitable foundation established in 1982, committed to reducing poverty and inequality in Canada and to building strong civic communities.

